

THE SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE OF BEING EUROPEAN TODAY FOR AN ORTHODOX: THE NEW ATHEIST ATTACK ON TRADITIONAL EUROPEAN VALUES AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

In the following paper, I will discuss three key issues: a) Is there a spiritual challenge for an Orthodox working and living in Europe? b) What is New Atheism and does it present a challenge for the traditional European values system and the Orthodox in particular? c) What can be the Orthodox response to the pluralism and “humanism” of New Atheism?

Keywords: European Values, Orthodox Christian Values, New Atheism, humanism, pluralism.

I. Why a Spiritual Challenge?

I will begin my discussion about the spiritual challenge of living in Europe and participating in the European Union political process for an Orthodox, by firstly discussing what European identity is and, in particular, what is the spiritual part of our European identity. I will then present a few challenges in terms of a more successful European integration. I will close this part of my discussion by highlighting what I see as the spiritual challenges for an Orthodox in this European integration.

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A. What Is European Identity?

There is an inherent difficulty in asking and receiving a satisfactory answer to the question of what is the contemporary European identity. This question could have the form of how the Europeans would define themselves if asked by someone who is not European. Another form could be what unifying characteristics in the way Europeans think and act could help someone who is not European identify the ones who are European as Europeans.

There seem to be two key-competing visions of European Identity, which owe their origins in relevant discussions of what is a Nation: first, we have the version that is outlined in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*²; in this vision, European Identity could be a form of imagined collectivity which is different from the face-to-face everyday realities that all Europeans find in their own micro-social lives; this imagined European community by some researchers is the basis of our transnational European identity. A major problem in such a vision is that imagined communities have the tendency to dehumanise and quantify the interests of all those who make them appear. This is so, because the person in its complexity is far more cumbersome to imagine than a specific interest or need. In this way, this vision of European identity (geared around vested interests and quantification measurements) competes with another vision of European identity. This difference in aims vision has been proposed by Ernest Renan, who in his *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (a talk he gave in Paris of 1882) provides the basis for a Transnational European Soul or Spiritual Principle:

...a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which are really one, constitute this soul and spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other, in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich trove of memories; the other is actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the undivided, shared heritage...³

² Benedict Anderson (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

³ Ernest Renan (1882). *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* Paris. Section III, paragraph 1, transl. by Ethan Rundell.

This latter vision of European identity is geared around a cluster of values that make up the European soul in a very similar way to Renan's idea that a nation is a soul or a spiritual principle. Even though interests do have a mention in Renan's talk, he nevertheless places the emphasis in the humanizing agents of our civilisation and thus, his idea proves to be very useful for our examination into European identity. So, let us explore further what this cluster of values could entail.

So, assuming that we accept Renan's vision as the one that interests us more (because it accommodates both material and immaterial aspects of European identity more easily), what exactly is the basis for this European identity? Answers to this question vary from a shared geographical location with a shared historical and cultural heritage and a cluster of shared values (personal freedom; justice; peace; plurality; unity; self-determination; prosperity) to political legitimisation issues, such as protection of fundamental human rights (with the known legislative, administrative and judicial difficulties in their conception and acknowledgement). So, in this way, Edmund Ohlendorf of IWB Radolfzell e.V., has actually claimed that European Identity could be viewed as a subject for teaching and learning.⁴

One could even propose a shared common sense or some form of rationality (as a methodology for problem solving for example) as the basis of this European Identity as a subject of teaching and learning. But can such a sharing of values or vision form the basis for a European common sense or some form of shared norms of rationality? In my critique to R. McKeon's version of *Sensus Communis Philosophicus* (1978), which for him can be the underlying structure for a typology of world philosophies, I claimed that within his attempt to standardise and typify world philosophies and civilisations, there is a serious danger to trivialise important messages. I expressed my worry in relation to McKeon's views in this way:

What is the benefit for an Ethics, a Philosophy or a Civilisation, if it is full of shallow messages? If a Civilisation and a Philosophy is to have a universal value, this value lies in its depth and profound importance for humankind. (Athanasopoulos 2004, 358)

⁴ Edmund Ohlendorf of IWB Radolfzell e.V., Contribution to the EDUVINET "European Identity" subject, tr. by Gillian Johson (1998).

On the basis of the above examination, my answer to European identity problem could take the following form: European identity is a composite and complex geographically located unity, which attempts to unify cultural values and heritage with a spiritual, moral, political and wider cultural significance; this identity should be considered as having a certain cultural depth and complexity with the inherent danger of a possible reduction to a shallow cluster of meanings (in the sense I outlined above in relation to McKeon's views). Also, this proposed mode of unification should reflect European heritage and widely accepted values.

My proposed scheme for European identity however, would have to answer specific inherent problems of integration, as it is practised in Europe today. For example, there is a growing debate of whether integration is to be conceived as assimilation or segregation. As one of the fundamental principles of the European Union is freedom of movement and work within the European Union, the debates on integration and multiculturalism become more and more important in the achievement of a basic and essential social cohesion. Actually, there is a growing movement within the EU that this debate should be supported by the revised Moral Code of European politics that is yet to be followed with consistency. In the words of EU officials:

We need a moral code of unifying politics above all with regard to the Europe that still has to be created. Those responsible in the institutions, especially in the Parliament and in the Commission, are required, in the name of this moral code, to always make clear the priorities and motives for the work of unification: peace, conciliation, tolerance, solidarity, justice, freedom.⁵

This political and moral code and, in consequence, the debate on integration, should not only respect the Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union (EU is founded "on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law"), but also the Article 151 in the same treaty (which describes the principle of "unity in diversity", according to which EU shall promote the diversity of its cultures, while "bringing the common

⁵ Carrefour of the European Commission on 7th-8th May 1997, in Santiago de Compostela.

cultural heritage to the fore"). Further additional parameters that could define and support the debate are the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1971-1994) and The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the Union (2000).

B. European Forms of Integration

In Europe, integration is not a new social and political phenomenon. It is also varied from country to country and from region to region.

In UK and Sweden, it takes the form of multi-culturalism, which supports the protection of cultural diversities within society. But this form of integration met significant problems: a social phenomenon developed where there is a significant political experience of parallel societies; social groups get isolated and form their own micro-social and micro-political environments with their own rules and principles of operation, which, in some respects, go against the wider social and political rules and principles. Other problems of multi-cultural integration refer to a dominant vs. non-dominant group power struggle and to a significant marginalisation of faith. Both of these problems, for many researchers, are problems inherent in the multi-cultural way of integrating varied ethnic groups and are very difficult to eradicate. In France, an assimilationist or universalist model of integration is followed, where the diverse ethnic groups are encouraged to assimilate into the dominant culture, even though an attempt is made to regard certain rights and all ethnic groups as equal. Lastly, in Germany and Switzerland a separationist or an exclusionist policy was in force till recently, according to which immigration is restricted and there is limited access to citizenship.⁶

It would be useful for our investigation to examine in more detail the UK form of integration. One of the most influential documents that try to define the UK model of integration is the *Swann Report*. It

⁶ Adapted from Lewis, Richard (2008). "New Europeans, New Identities – Reflections on Europe's Dilemma", working paper for The Institute for European Studies (VUB), Brussels, p. 19.

describes a 'democratic pluralist society' as one which seeks to 'achieve a balance between, on the one hand, the maintenance and active support of the essential elements of the cultures and lifestyles of all the ethnic groups within it, and, on the other, the acceptance by all groups of a set of shared values distinctive of the society as a whole'.⁷ This sensibility of pluralism alongside commonly held values and principles, while sometimes challenged by both the 'left' (liberal universalism) and 'right' (assimilationism), has been influential in the UK attempts to establish multi-culturalism.⁸ However, it has led religious and ethnic communities in the UK to express dissatisfaction with a political system that encourages a non-religious point of view (as we will see later on).

A similar problem has appeared in the case of the Preamble of the European Constitution. In the finalised document that is in force today (and approved by the EU heads of state in Brussels in 2004), there is no mention to Christianity and the Christian heritage that formed the basis of European culture. What is in the Preamble today ("Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law"), provides a very vague reference to "religion" and religion is placed on an equal basis to "humanism" and other cultural factors. There was significant political debate both prior to 2004 and after on the nature of the concrete cultural values that are implied in the Preamble. A crucial issue in this debate was the lack of reference to God and Christianity. There were specific objections from the Roman-Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, who were left entirely dissatisfied with the Preamble. The response from the EU to these criticisms revealed the EU officials' motives:

In some countries, the national constitution traditionally contains a reference to God. When the "Constitution for Europe" text was being drafted and negotiated,

⁷ To be consulted the *Swann Report*, Department of Education and Science, 1985, p. 6.

⁸ D. Feldman (2011). "Why the English like turbans: multicultural politics in British history", in Feldman, D. and Lawrence, J. (eds.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 296-7; S. Poulter (1998). *Ethnicity, Law and Human Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 19.

some governments said they wanted it to include a reference to God or to the Christian tradition of the Union. Others, defending the secular nature of the State and its neutrality with regard to different religions, didn't want any specific religion to be named in the text of the European Constitution. In its preamble, the Constitution recognises that the EU draws inspiration from Europe's cultural, religious and humanist inheritance. This wording is neutral and appropriate. Indeed, any reference to individual religions could be seen as causing division between European citizens. In addition, Article I-52 of the Constitution obliges the Union to engage in an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches and religious associations, just as it does with civil society. Finally, the Charter of Fundamental Rights now enshrined in the Constitution lays down that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article II-70).⁹

It is obvious from the above EU official response to the growing criticism that the move to secularism and "neutrality" was a conscious choice to avoid alienating the ones who believe in the secular nature of the State (and in consequence of the European Union). In so doing, however, it alienates the ones who strongly believe in the Christian heritage of Europe. It creates for them a serious spiritual challenge in remaining within the EU. It is also obvious that the officials who have drafted and have approved the Preamble thought that mentioning a specific religion would cause divisions between the European citizens. This minimalistic approach to the Christian heritage of European culture opened the way to the political and social phenomenon of New Atheism, which may soon become the new ideology of European Union. To this, we will turn our attention now.

II. New Atheism: False Pre-Suppositions

One could outline the background to the forms of contemporary secularism in this way. Politically, one could claim that it is the result of Reformation and the general aim of the humanists of that time to disengage society and politics from the Church. The Radical Enlightenment movement intensified this critique against the social and political role of the Church. Liberalism, nationalism and communism

⁹ EUROPA Rapid Press Releases, "Questions and Answers on the Constitution", 2005.

allowed various forms political disengagement from Church and attempted a widespread secularisation of society. Various philosophers supported this movement for an increased secularisation of society: Hobbes proposed political absolutism and saw the Church as an obstacle to the necessity of increasing the political power of the monarch. Nietzsche thought that religion and Christianity, in particular, was an outmoded and dangerous obstacle to the power of superman. Marx saw the Church as a tool for political and economic oppression of the proletariat by the oligarchy of the landowners. Mill advocated a series of political freedoms and rights (chiefly among them the freedom of expression) and feared that the Church is a negative social force in guaranteeing and further developing these freedoms. Hume and Kant saw religion as only a moderately useful social norm with a very limited (if not absent) philosophical significance. Evolution theorists completed the circle by refuting creation and by bringing in the debates the spirit of modern science which should take the place of old religion.¹⁰

But, undoubtedly today, the single most important influence on the process of secularisation of social, national and European institutions is by far the movement of New Atheism. However, it is worthy of note that the political principles of New Atheism (which advocates increased secularisation of society and social marginalisation of the Church and indeed any form of religion) could in principle work against multiculturalism and integration. Actually, what it maintains is that religion can only be a private choice that should not interfere with the socialisation and political life of others, including one's own children. Children should be left away from religion and a religious upbringing and they should be educated along primarily humanistic principles. R. Dawkins puts this issue thus:

More generally (and this applies to Christianity no less than to Islam), what is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them –

¹⁰ I have explored and defended my views on these philosophers in C. Athanasopoulos (2002). *The Nature, Value and Freedom of the Ethical Life of the Person: Ideas and perspectives in Modern Ethics (16th-19th Century)*, Athens: Typothito Gutenberg.

given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by – to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades.¹¹

In this way, New Atheism has been criticised by many political theorists who belong to ethnic and religious minorities that it is pushing for an extreme form of social and political persecution of religion and religious minorities. According to these political theorists, religion can be just another politicised public identity such as race and ethnicity, and so any attempt to drive it away from the political arena is against the multi-culturalism and integration agenda.¹² The New Atheist movement falsely pre-supposes here that religion cannot have a political identity and dimension. It is worthy of note that the EU response (as cited above), avoids answering the issue of how it expects to support multi-culturalism and integration of religious groups in a secularised society. Its approach seems to be that it should accommodate only religious groups that can accept a secularisation of society and a radical division between the social and the religious. This may be good for some religions but not for all, and certainly not for the Orthodox Christian. Hence, the spiritual challenge for the Orthodox, who wishes to participate in the EU political process, remains and is further intensified with the oncoming New Atheist ideology in the EU political deliberations.

In terms of the philosophical pre-dispositions of New Atheists, they tend to support physicalism and naturalism, according to which the mental is reducible to the physical and the natural is all that is certain and exists. (Baggini 2003) These naturalistic and reductivist tendencies in terms of their philosophical pre-dispositions drive R. Dawkins to claim that religious claims must correspond to the findings of natural science: “If scientific claims stand or fall by virtue of their correspondence with a real world out there, then the same must go for religious claims”. In this way “God’s existence or non-existence is a

¹¹ R. Dawkins (2007). *The God Delusion*. London: Black Swan, pp. 347-348.

¹² T. Modood (1998). “Anti-essentialism, multiculturalism, and the ‘recognition’ of religious groups”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 378-99; T. Modood (2010). “The struggle for ethno-religious equality in Britain: the place of the Muslim community”, in Higgins, M., Smith, C. and Storey, J. (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 299-304.

scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice.” (Dawkins 2007, 24) His investigation into the merits of this scientific fact make him conclude that

God is a delusion; [human] intelligence is the result of the process of evolution; religion is a stage in social evolution, and should be discarded as false and irrelevant now. (52)

Daniel Dennett echoing Dawkins’ aphoristic remarks about religion goes a step further and proposes a socio-biological theory of religion claiming that religion is a poisoning *meme*, socially destructive and an obstacle for further evolutionary development.¹³

Of course, the New Atheists should be able to answer to criticisms offered by other scientists. This is an obvious consequence from their scientific outlook and naturalistic tendencies. However, this is not the case. As evolution is not a science like other natural sciences, because some of its explanatory devices have not yet been proven (for example the missing evolutionary link between man and other primates), it is challenged both in terms of its predictive force and in terms of its testability. Furthermore even their philosophical outlook has some rather dubious metaphysical commitments. Their materialism, physicalism and naturalism is challenged by sceptics in terms of their epistemological commitments. Nagel and Feyerabend have in various ways attacked and destroyed their core arguments using intuitions from Ancient Sceptics and the later Wittgenstein.¹⁴

In political terms their socio-biological commitments are also rather suspicious. Humanity, in its recent history, has suffered tremendously from reductivistic socio-biological analyses of the human condition and their arrogant disregard and contempt towards “non-scientific” social engagement. It is also opening new roads into social control of the human genome, which may justify eugenics and euthanasia on

¹³ Daniel Dennett (2006). *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. N.Y.: Viking.

¹⁴ For Nagel see his T. Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?”, *Philosophical Review*, 83, 1974, pp. 435–50. For Feyerabend, see my own study here: C. Athanasopoulos (1994). “Pyrrhonism and Paul Feyerabend: A Study of Ancient and Modern Scepticism”, in K. Boudouris, ed., *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 2nd Vol. Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, pp. 11-29.

the non-conformists, so as to save the New Atheist agenda of socio-biological development.

Undoubtedly, the New Atheist movement has been supported by a general social and political drive that moves society towards a de-sanctification and de-spiritualisation of faith. But the new Atheist movement further augments this process with the eventual de-stabilisation of social norms and values. Religion is, in this way, reduced to its social study. Religion becomes a social phenomenon with no spiritual value. As a result, the metaphysical basis for a foundation of morals becomes corrupt and gradually becomes impotent. The end result is a de-valuation of social norms and a complete secularisation and quantification of human institutions (such as the EU).

III. Orthodox Christian Response to New Atheism

In this climate of secularisation and de-valuation of society and human institutions, the Orthodox Christian faces a serious political and spiritual challenge. The Orthodox know that God cannot be known via scientific naturalism, materialism and physicalism. Living their faith in a mystical way, they believe in more than what they see and feel with their senses. Senses for them are important, but the Orthodox always look beyond them. They also know that all human knowledge, after the fall from Paradise, is fallible if left to its own devices. But fallible away from God does not mean that it cannot be transformed by God and, thus, lose in this way, via divine energy this fallibility. The Church, by denouncing Apollinarianism in the Second Ecumenical Council (381), affirmed that the human mind is fallible, but that also it can be transformed.¹⁵ This essential Orthodox doctrine, which St Basil the Great has supported it well in his writings¹⁶, found in the writings of St Gregory Palamas additional support and further elaboration. In the *Triads*, St Gregory Palamas elaborated on how divine energies can unite

¹⁵ Fr. Georges Florovsky (1931). "Offenbarung, Philosophic und Theologie", in *Zwischen den Zeiten*, Heft 6.

¹⁶ See cf. St Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron*, Homily VI.

and transform the human mind and the human soul in its entirety, allowing thus, the union with God while alive and on this earth. Of course this attraction of divine energies needs a persistent attempt to clean one's thoughts, body and mind from impure and unclean actions, impressions and desires. This new divine vision and knowledge through the divine energies and the necessary *nepsis* (cleansing) is the only one that can guarantee truth and infallibility. According to the Orthodox Fathers, this new vision and knowledge through the divine energies is needed not only for sound metaphysics and ethics, but also for sound epistemology. This sound epistemology, metaphysics and ethics are the result of two free actions: the one from man and the other from God, who in His absolute freedom of will decides to show mercy and make known via the divine energies that He imparts on the clean and through repentance what is utterly incomprehensible. In a unique mix of intuitions from St Athanasius till the 13th c. Church Fathers, St Gregory Palamas puts forward a detailed methodology for this cleansing process: Hesychastic practices, which involve the repetition of the Jesus prayer and *nepsis* as true repentance are pre-requisites for this knowledge of God. The Mind should be unified with the Body and should become one with it, through a return to the heart via the prayer of the heart and the cleansing of all its powers. Again we see here a mix of intuitions from Church Fathers such as St John the Damascene (where not only the mind and the will but the body also in its entirety is transformable) through to Fathers like St Symeon the New Theologian being expressed through the work of St Gregory Palamas. Orthodox Theology in this way, becomes far too rich to be reduced to its social study. Any attempt to de-sanctify and de-spiritualise faith is considered a serious impediment in the knowledge of God not only in a metaphysical and epistemological sense, but also in an ethical sense: Cowardice becomes the chief, socially embedded, sin and consists in allowing any decrease or lessening in faith. Again here we see a mix of intuitions from the writings of the Fathers of the Desert to St John of Sinai and then to St Gregory Palamas.¹⁷

¹⁷ I have developed themes from what I claim here in my book: C. Athanasopoulos (2004). *Ancillae Theologiae: Philosophy and Theology in the Medieval and Byzantine Times*. Athens: Parousia, and various papers on Orthodox mysticism in the last three years.

IV. Conclusions

We can now draw some conclusions from our investigation so far.

New Atheism is suspect of dubious metaphysical foundations and false pre-suppositions: political, metaphysical, and epistemological.

European Union integration and current multi-culturalist practices are influenced from the New Atheist approaches to religion and the inherent self-contradictions that are caused by the false pre-suppositions of this movement. In this perspective, religion becomes a social phenomenon with political ramifications and studied through quantifiable science.

This presents a serious challenge to the Orthodox wishing to participate actively in EU structures and institutions. The Orthodox feel that their Faith and Tradition cannot be impoverished, de-valued and reduced to social studies and quantifiable data. The Orthodox Christians find European political compromises on religious identity and the vision of EU on the basis of present deliberations problematic and in need of further negotiations. One way to move forward is for the EU to recognise the mystical aspect of the Orthodox Faith and acknowledge its essential resistance to reducible forms of study and social and political analyses.

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